

## From a U.S. Marine to His Vietnamese Counterparts, with an Introduction by Edward Tick

By Pat Guariglia

### **Letter of reconciliation after war: an introduction**

War deconstructs our world, causing not just the individual but everything human to be rendered “disordered.” We must make extreme efforts, step out of our comfortable boxes of diagnoses and prescribed treatments, even out of the safety of the therapy room, to bring genuine healing to those suffering the traumas of war and violence. Healing must include significant efforts to rebuild our world and reconstitute broken relationships. This is atonement – bringing back into oneness what war and violence have sundered.

In my long service to our warriors and survivors, I have sought the most comprehensive healing strategies to achieve atonement and reconciliation for all touched by war. In this effort, since 2000 I have led annual healing and reconciliation journeys for American veterans of the Vietnam-American War as well as family members and peace activists. We travel all over Viet Nam, visit former bases and battlefields, immerse in Vietnamese culture, and meet with Vietnamese veterans and survivors of all factions. We sit in respectful circles and share the stories that prove to be universal and bond us, as Viet Cong veteran Tam Tien said to my visiting group, “as brothers and sisters who survived the same hell.”

Pat Guariglia was a Marine sergeant in heavy fighting in Viet Nam. He returned psychologically and spiritually wounded by the war and has courageously engaged in many healing efforts. Though he has not returned to Viet Nam, he has assisted me in philanthropic activities in that country and the US, helping any survivors of that conflict. In our reconciliation efforts, Pat wrote the following letter to his counterparts among Vietnamese veterans – the North Vietnamese Army Regulars and Viet Cong against whom he fought.

We translated his letter and read it aloud in both English and Vietnamese at veteran gatherings in several regions of Viet Nam. In every instance the veterans of both countries and all factions recognized these as the words of a brother in arms who has traveled the long distance from hatred and fear to honor and respect, and from an identity as an antagonist to the shared identity of “brothers and sisters who survived

*Close Encounters in War Journal*, 3: “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as Aftermath of Close Encounters in War” (2020)

the same hell.” Pat learned that truth. He now teaches and preaches it as he continues to guide younger veterans on their long healing paths home.

*Edward Tick*

### **From a U.S. Marine to His Vietnamese Counterparts**

To all at this veterans gathering. I am sorry I cannot be there personally with you in Viet Nam.

I want to say first that I recognize that all of us that took part in the Vietnam-American War were, for the most part, there because we thought we were serving a cause greater than ourselves. We were willing, if need be, to sacrifice ourselves for that cause. It has been a long time coming for me to make that realization about us all, but I recognize it for what it is – the truth.

During my service in the war, I did not want to see that truth for I was blinded to it by hatred. I was only thinking about me and my sacrifices. After all I traveled 13,000 miles or 20,000 km to Viet Nam to a people and place I did not know because I wanted to help the Vietnamese people. I wanted to help them fight the aggression of the north, to stop communism, and to help the ordinary Vietnamese person to achieve freedom. To be free. To protect them from harm, from evil. I knew what I was doing was noble, so I came and fought you, my enemy, with all I had in me, believing in my ideals. Then you killed my brother, my blood brother, my closest friend, a person I loved. I fought harder after that, wanting to revenge his death and even the score. I saw my enemies only as evil. You killed a good man I loved. So I was going to hunt you down and make you pay. Eventually I realized that you can never get even. Revenge does not and cannot achieve anything worthwhile; it only spreads more harm.

After a while I went back home, back to the States, back to New York. The war and its brutality had changed me forever. But I decided to put the war behind me, start a family and carry on. I still couldn't, wouldn't, think of my enemies as people; you were the VC, the NVA, Charlie, or Gooks, people to hate. I kept these feelings hidden for a long time, then through a series of fortunate events, I received psychological help. With this help my hatred eased and gradually faded away. It was replaced with me trying to understand what had happened all those years ago.

To do that I tried to put myself in your position. Suppose I had been born in Viet Nam. Suppose I had seen what the French did in Viet Nam. Suppose I had seen the corruption of the central government in Saigon. I might have looked at the US presence in my county not as beneficial but as perhaps a bad thing, another invader. Suppose I

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had a loved one killed by bombing or I heard of a young family killed, even accidentally, by US troops or even US supported troops, what would I have done? So now I know.

I would have wanted to free my country from those evil people that would bomb and kill an innocent family. If I was in the North I would have joined the NVA. If I was in the South I would have joined the Viet Cong. I would HAVE to join. Because that was the noble thing to do, even if it meant sacrificing myself.

Upon realizing this, I came unexpectedly to a place of peace. My hatred totally evaporated. Now I realized that we were all, on both sides, trying to the right thing. So now what? For me it means seeing you and your side as not very different from me. Both of us tried to do the right thing. In that spirit I see you as fellow warriors, brothers of a kind, even if we were on opposite sides, in that spirit I ask you for forgive me in your heart as I forgive you in mine.

It is time that we as brothers in arms try to love rather than hate each other. It is time...

Respectfully,

Sgt. Pat Guariglia

United States Marine Corps